

## The House on Masonic: A Haight-Ashbury Story

**Susan Knapp**

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*The book's riveting main character proves to be Haight-Ashbury itself, at its tumultuous peak.*

Susan Knapp's *The House on Masonic* goes back to the summer of love to explore the hippie movement from its ground zero: the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco.

In 1969, Terry Walker is a few years beyond the age when she should have graduated from college. Instead, she has dropped out. She is sure she wants no part of her parents' lifestyle and has no idea of what comes next. Lacking a plan, she hitches a ride with a friend driving west and ends up in Haight-Ashbury, the epicenter of everything countercultural.

The story sets out in the frothy, first-person style of post-millennial chick lit, complete with a listicle on the first page. Haight-Ashbury culture, with its lack of demands and promise of perpetual freedom, seems to be just what Terry has been looking for. Soon she has bonded with other equally aimless dropouts and moved into a commune.

The book's main character proves to be Haight-Ashbury itself, at its tumultuous peak, and descriptions of it come scene after scene, sometimes reading like a well-researched punch list. This focus on Haight-Ashbury comes at the expense of other story elements, particularly in the first half of the book.

Terry fills the role of an observer and reporter more fully than that of a heroine, while other characters are whisked in and out of the commune, leaving little impression. The book generally gets details right, most notably the fact that many baby boomers were neither anarchists nor truth-seekers but rather upper-middle-class adolescents whose easy upbringings and high expectations left them unprepared for life.

Occasional vernacular errors are cringe-inducing, especially the overuse of "groovy" and the tendency of characters to refer to themselves as hippies, a word rejected as a media invention.

In the second half of the book, the view broadens and deepens. The frothy surface is scraped away, and Terry glimpses a darker side of the world she escaped into. For all the frenzied insistence on fun and freedom, no one is having a particularly good time.

The commune, so inviting as a concept, turns into hard reality, with too few workers and welfare checks shared among too many people. Protests turn brutal, and unfolding events prove that actions really do have consequences. As Terry grapples with these facts, she becomes a more sympathetic character, and the spin cycle of incidents resolves into a more compelling story arc.

No one book can encompass the vast panorama of the late 1960s, but Susan Knapp's *The House on Masonic* paints a detailed thumbnail.

SUSAN WAGGONER (September 13, 2017)

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